

A 9mm handgun is shown in the background, slightly out of focus, with its slide and trigger visible. The title "How I Shot a Friend" is overlaid on the image in a large, stylized, yellow font with a black outline and a drop shadow effect.

How I Shot a Friend

By Pvt Johnathan T. Markert

You've heard the basic safety rules for handling weapons and undoubtedly will hear them again. Maybe you have heard them so many times you even are getting tired of hearing them. But it is vitally important that you understand these rules, accept their value, and, above all, follow them when you're handling a weapon in any situation. Believe me, I know.

I graduated boot camp and the school of infantry with ease. I was eager and motivated to hit the fleet. Being sent to Hawaii was a dream come true. Senior Marines were very encouraging; they told me I was going to go places in the Corps. We went on our annual UDP to Okinawa, and I could not have been more excited to see Japan. My duty was to stand post as a sentry at the gates of Camp Hansen. This duty would involve handling loaded 9-mm pistols. "Not a problem for me," I thought. "I'm a machine gunner, and a pistol is my secondary weapon. I know it inside and out." Unfortunately, I disregarded the basic safety rules and ignored what a 9-mm round can do to a human being.

On a quiet Sunday evening in June 2003, two Marines and I were scheduled for sentry duty at gate 1 of Camp Hansen. We climbed into the back of a HMMWV to be driven to post. About a quarter-mile ride to the gate was all it took for my life to change and a fellow Marine's life to end.

A close friend and I pulled out our 9-mm pistols and began some horseplay with the weapons. We pointed them in all directions, even at each other, and put the weapons on fire, then cocked the hammers. With our weapons in condition one, we began a mock tussle, and that is all it took for my pistol to fire.

At that point, my world stopped moving, and the tragedy began for me, my friend, our families, and many others. I went into shock and thought it could not be, but it was happening right in front of me.

My friend and fellow Marine had been shot in the head. I froze as he slumped to the floor of the HMMWV, and blood pooled on the floor. I scrambled to render first aid to him, as others converged on the HMMWV. Someone said he was dead, but I found he still was breathing and felt I could stop the bleeding with my shirt. As I tried, I felt tissue and other matter near his head wound. I feared for my friend's life and was numbing with despair by the time the EMT arrived and took him from my arms. The tragedy did not end here.

I was handcuffed and taken to PMO, where an investigation and the longest night of my life began. The questioning by investigators was detailed and focused on the horseplay with weapons. It was painstaking and added a helpless feeling of regret to my fear and despair. I could not see, let alone accept, that a moment of foolishness could lead to something so horrible. I was placed under suicide watch after questioning and on legal hold and liberty risk upon release. My friend languished eight days

in the hospital before he died from the wound that I had inflicted.

Six months of agony and anguish passed before my court-martial, which was as heart-rending as a funeral and as bad as reliving your worst nightmare. Facing more than 20 years in prison and discharge from the Corps was very frightening and difficult but not as hard as seeing and hearing what my friend's mother, father, and sister had been through. I also had to face the effect it had on my own mother and brother-in-law, a former Marine who had accompanied my mother to Okinawa for support.

I stood up at sentencing and apologized to my friend's family, and they graciously accepted it. Although I believe they understand their son was a close friend of mine and his death was an accident, I now must live with the responsibility for the loss of my friend and a good Marine.

I write this from the brig as a discharged Marine but with the belief I can be of some help to any Marine who reads or hears my story. This tragedy, with all its pain and suffering, could have been avoided simply by following the basic rules and not playing or fooling around with weapons, which have no regard for you, your skill, intentions, or brother Marines. It is you who must think and act with care and purpose. Not doing so is the first step to disaster. This is the lesson I learned on a night that I never will stop thinking about.

No matter how skilled or comfortable you are with a weapon, the basic safety rules apply. Remember, Treat, Never, Keep, Keep:

- Treat every weapon as if it were loaded;
- Never point your weapon at anything you do not intend to shoot;
- Keep your finger straight and off the trigger until you are ready to fire;
- Keep your weapon on safe until you intend to fire. **GW**

On Jan. 20, 2004, Markert, then a PFC, went to a general court-martial for his offenses. In accordance with his pleas, he was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter and reckless endangerment. The military judge sentenced Markert to a Bad-Conduct Discharge, three years confinement, and reduction to E-1. Prisoner Markert is serving his confinement at the brig aboard Camp Hansen, Okinawa.

On previous occasions, Marines from Markert's section had been known to handle their weapons in inappropriate ways. While on guard, he developed a false sense of comfort in handling his M9.

Guard duty can be a monotonous task, which is why the disciplined Marine Corps has taken this job in U.S. embassies, aboard U.S. ships, and naval stations throughout the world. Nevertheless, NCOs must be vigilant with the younger Marines, assuring behavior, including weapons handling, is in accordance with Marines Corps' good order and discipline—Ed.

